Recognition of prior learning— Normative assessment or co-construction of preferred identities?

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Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been an important element of Australia's Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy since it was officially adopted as a key national principle in 1991 (VEETAC 1991, cited in Wilson and Lilly 1996:2). The aim of RPL is to formally assess a person's skills gained through life and work experience, in order to award credit towards nationally recognised qualifications. It is an integral part of access and equity strategies, which are designed to 'improve access to and outcomes from vocational education and training for disadvantaged groups' (Smith & Keating 1997: 38). However, limited attention has been paid to the operations of power within the assessor-candidate relationship. This paper raises questions about the perspective of RPL as a self-evidently benign activity and describes concerns regarding its

application. It uses postmodern theories of identity and a philosophy of recognition to propose an understanding of the potential impacts of RPL and invite new assessment practices to advance its emancipatory goals.

Introduction

Many Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers are interested to make formal skills recognition or recognition of prior learning (RPL) accessible to workforces where expertise has commonly been discounted due to the taboo nature of the work and/or the lack of academic background of its workers. At the Australian Institute of Social Relations (AISR[1]), RPL candidates have included peer educators from sex work organisations, youth workers, Aboriginal workers, newly arrived migrants and other non-traditional learners. It appears that the very life experience that is crucial to the participants' job roles and maximising the impact of their work, has often operated to encourage negative self-descriptions and exclude them from formal education or professional acknowledgment. RPL can be a powerful vehicle for noticing and accrediting these workers' existing practice wisdom, learnt over many years in non-formal contexts. This then opens up opportunities for individuals to engage with further formal learning, establish career paths or in some cases transfer to other sectors.

Equity and access issues such as these have been strong drivers in VET policy during the past two decades. Considerable attention has therefore been given to strengthening the capacity of registered training organisations (RTOs) to implement recognition processes effectively. It has been said that RPL can be "a powerful tool for bringing people into the learning system" (Hargreaves 2006:2) who have otherwise been excluded from formal education and thereby failed to gain access to the benefits of academic credentials,

social status and subsequent employment. Many researchers and commentators have noted how RPL has been seen as having the potential to act as a vehicle for social inclusion and even as a form of redress for past exclusions (Wheelahan, Dennis, Firth *et al.* 2003, Harris 1999, Castle & Attwood 2001).

From this perspective, RPL can be understood as an empowering and emancipatory activity that opens doors and increases the cultural and social capital of those who access it. It recognises skills and knowledges learnt outside academic institutions through life and work experience, validates and articulates these within formal education, and contributes to the awarding of relevant qualifications that hold status within the community. Researchers have observed that learners not only accomplish accelerated pathways to final qualifications, but suggest that increased confidence and self-esteem can also result from the process (Smith 2004, Cleary *et al.* 2002). As such, RPL is a benevolent practice that addresses equity issues, challenges the academic stranglehold on what counts as 'credentialled' knowledge and increases individual learner's belief in their own abilities. Further, it allows educators and assessors to live out the politics of social justice and empowerment pedagogy, in the traditions of Paolo Freire (1972), Patti Lather (1991) or bell hooks (1994).

Disappointments and hazards within RPL

As a result of this overwhelmingly positive perspective, great attention has been paid to improving access to RPL in order to advance social inclusion goals. However, many VET practitioners are frustrated to learn it is still mostly accessed by those who are already familiar with and acculturated into the formal education system. Within the university, adult education and vocational education sectors, those who successfully access RPL are typically literate, familiar with formal educational language and concepts, and have significant skills in negotiating the complexities of the assessment

process (Harris 1999, Cleary *et al.* 2002, Wheelahan *et al.* 2003). There is acknowledgement in the literature that, for an individual to present their skills and knowledge, they must be aware of what they know and have additional ability to 'translate their professional or vocational practice discourse into the academic' (Wheelahan, Miller & Newton 2002: 13). Cameron (2005) has found that undertaking RPL 'demands high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem, a well developed ability to engage in self-recognition activities and the recording of these in print based media … along with a knowledge and familiarity of formal learning systems' (Cameron 2005: 13). Explicitly knowing what one knows, *and* being able to present this in competency-based language with confidence, are likely to be significant prerequisites for successful recognition. These prerequisites then exclude the very individuals targeted by access and equity policies.

It seems that RPL is largely benefitting those who are already formally trained to a particular level and engaged with educational systems and processes. With a few exceptions it fails to reach traditionally marginalised groups such as Indigenous populations or culturally diverse migrants, and there appears to be a substantial gap between the aspirations or acclaimed benefits and the reality of implementation (Pithers 1999, Bateman 2003, Wheelahan *et al.* 2003, Smith 2004, Bowman 2004). With these limitations now clearly understood from national and international experience, there nonetheless remains a level of optimism for the potential of RPL to enhance social inclusion, providing the process can be appropriately refined and certain populations targeted more effectively.

However, in some cases RPL is not only proving difficult to access but also perhaps harmful. Some commentators have drawn attention to hazards within competency-based assessment generally and RPL in particular (Harris 2000, Andersson & Harris 2006, Usher & Edwards 1994, Usher, Bryant & Johnston 1997, Castle & Attwood 2001). These hazards relate to the effects of power within the

learner/assessor relationship and how RPL is socially and culturally understood. Such thinking invites a re-theorising of the purpose and effects of RPL, problematising its implementation and positioning it in a less beneficial light than is generally asserted.

This more critical way of thinking suggests that in the process of skills recognition the learner's experience is ascribed certain meanings by the assessor who then holds the power to translate them into competencies that can be credentialled. It is argued that, rather than validating alternative knowledge learnt through life and work, RPL is a process of assessing the individual against norms (competencies) set by the dominant culture. 'Success' therefore becomes a question of how close to the norm the learner can represent their experience. The less familiar or comfortable with the dominant culture learners are, the less likely they are to negotiate the language and meanings that are necessary to be awarded competence. Further, Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997: 105) have warned that RPL will 'always end up being *oppressive*' (my italics) because it attempts to attribute finite meanings to an individual's experience and thus totalises that person, closing down possibilities for preferred identities to emerge. A question might thus arise as to whether RPL assessment is mostly, in every day practice, the application of a normative judgement which actively discounts certain types of knowledge and limits the individual's potential—becoming a vehicle for oppression rather than liberation.

In the South African context, Harris (1999) has previously taken up this theme, urging a re- conceptualisation of RPL as a 'social practice' functioning largely to perpetuate dominant discourses and mainstream interests. From this position, instead of viewing RPL as a set of procedures to increase access to training courses and qualifications, we are invited to critically examine power relations within it. In current practice in Australia, RPL assessment is, arguably, most often presented as an objective measurement of skills against universal criteria, effectively masking normative

judgements that perpetuate the dominant discourse on what is skilful, professional practice. Instead of empowering the candidate, this could conceivably *undermine* a person's sense of self-worth and preferred identities by constructing, for those who do not match the criteria, an inadequate, unprofessional, invalid self. In this sense, it is a 'gatekeeper' for mainstream approaches functioning as a mechanism for exclusion of those who do not conform (Barker 2001, cited in Wheelahan *et al.* 2003) and denying skills that are rendered invisible through rigid application of a normative gaze. In addition, the process of reflection required to articulate experience and its concomitant learning has been found to 'provoke feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness' in some, and even 'entrench existing forms of discrimination' (Castle & Attwood 2001: 68, referring to black South African learners who are a key population for RPL as social inclusion). Other evidence from enterprise-based RPL research in Australia points out that some workers have found the process actually humiliating (Blom *et al.* 2004).

A further concern surrounding the equity goals of RPL can be drawn from wider educational research which suggests that the achievement of formal recognition and credentialled knowledge for traditionally marginalised groups can fragment a person's sense of identity and distance them from their communities (Reay 2004). From this perspective, the gaining of a qualification symbolises a transgression or rejection of community values and as such alienates the individual from their known social context, creating a potential dissonance in relation to the 'self'. A person may be brought into conflict with their preferred descriptions of self and with significant others' sense of 'who they are' or where they 'belong'. In this manner, educational achievement can be 'a delicate balance between realising potential and maintaining a sense of an authentic self' (Reay 2004: 34). This is a type of transformation could be said that may generate dislocation, self-doubt and confusion.

Regarded in this light, recognition of prior learning is not an entirely benign practice but can perhaps, under certain conditions, become a powerful tool for the re-imposition of normative judgements. These judgements (already so familiar to many non-traditional learners) can generate negative effects and potentially compound disengagement. An examination of this potential may prove to be a fruitful area for consideration in the struggle to engage marginalised populations and unlock the longed-for emancipatory effects.

The discursive production of identity and 'therapeutic' assessment skills

One strategy to investigate how RPL may position and influence learners and respond to these concerns is to use a postmodern framework to examine how it contributes to identity construction. From a postmodern perspective, the 'self' is a cultural construct constituted through particular discourses and uses of language, continuously being inscribed and re-inscribed upon experience (Chappell *et al.* 2003). Language and stories of self do not merely describe who we are but actually create who we become. Further, we draw language and themes for these stories from those available to us in our social and cultural context. Writing about the emergence of collective and individual identities, Seyla Benhabib (2002) argues that "We are all born into webs of interlocution or narrative, from familial and gender narratives ... to the macro narratives of collective identity... We become aware of who we are by learning to become conversation partners in these narratives" (p. 15).

Educational institutions (such as RTOs) have been granted significant power by the community to confer meaning within relationships of learning and assessment and through this can be a factor in shaping potential and actual identity claims. The RPL process is implicated in this to no less a degree than any other educational practice. Arguably, learners have some agency in shaping or resisting these meanings, and in this sense RPL assessment can be viewed as a site of negotiated

meaning. The assessor and learner negotiate, contest and construct together the meaning of the learner's experiential knowledge. The necessary investigating, naming, analysing and summing up of what the learner knows and has done, generate a degree of personal reflection. It is through this process that the learner's self-descriptions and identity claims may be de-stabilised and opened up for re-examination.

RPL can thus be seen as providing an opportunity for people to re-construct themselves through particular stories of their experience, which become re-inscribed with new meanings (for example, academic recognition, professional competence and so on). Their re-inscriptions of self can be valued by the dominant discourse of professionalism and 'credentialled' in the form of a qualification or statements of attainment. In this manner, positive transformation and increased self-esteem may become possible for learners as they relate to new identity claims which provide further opportunities for self-reflection. Sensitivity to the candidate's social and cultural context is required to support an integration of those new identity claims into existing relationships and expectations. Harris has remarked that some RPL processes may invite a 'therapeutic pedagogy' (2000a: 30) and such an approach would arguably require assessors to have particular interpersonal skills and a strongly student-centred approach 'bordering on the therapeutic' (2000b: 7).

From this analysis, we see that the processes of recognition assessment can be viewed as a conversation that occurs within the identity project of life and an interaction between people with differing experience and knowledges. In this interaction, interpretations are adopted or resisted, asserted or rejected, and the conversation thus gives birth to new ways of perceiving oneself and acting in the world. Chappell *et al.* (2003: 54) have described formal education as an 'identity resource' that provides certain types of material for this conversation. They contend that both learners and teachers (or in this case assessors) are 'doing identity work'

throughout the pedagogical process. Within this approach, education can be seen as a 'technology for constructing particular kinds of people' (*ibid*: 10), sometimes viewed as a way to control behaviour, but also offering opportunities for increased agency and mutual influence. The manner in which we assess and how we engage in the assessor-candidate relationship is critical to the outcomes from this process. The educator and learner are thus 'conversation partners' and power operates within this relationship to confer greater status for certain meanings and values. How we approach our relationship to the power that is in play in this conversation can make a difference to the kinds of identities we construct together.

In this manner, assessment becomes a vehicle through which to research, describe, debate, confer meaning and extend stories of experience. As Chappell *et al.* (2003: 15) explain, the individual is an *effect* of this discursive process, drawing on readily available ontological narratives in order to construct themselves (in this case, narratives of the 'qualified' and 'competent' professional). The assessor engages in this story to write the applicant into that narrative and also to write themselves in as qualified and appropriate judges of professional standards. The assessment process thus brings the learner and assessor together to seek an exchange of stories regarding skilled, professional, competent and ultimately, *qualified* practice. They each identify with aspects and characters within these stories and finally agree their respective positions.

The philosophy of recognition

RPL viewed through this lens could be said to embody a much broader and fundamental human need for recognition of the self and for the co-construction of one another as valid beings. Recognition theory offers us a useful means of pursuing this consideration. Drawing from Hegelian philosophy, recognition theory, as described by contemporary philosopher Axel Honneth (1995), argues that we are all in a 'struggle for recognition' that is fundamental to individual

and social identity. We become agents in our own lives through the experience of being recognised as having validity and the capacity to act. Honneth (1995) suggests that humans are driven by an instinct towards mutual recognition, in the journey towards individual achievement and positive engagement in the social sphere. This includes recognition through personal relations, but also institutional relations and frameworks of social value, such as those embedded in the RPL process. Applying these understandings in a psychoanalytic framework, Benjamin (1988) explains that 'in order to exist for oneself one has to exist for an "other"' (p.53).

Such theories have significant relevance to the exchanges occurring within a recognition assessment interview, which can be seen as a microcosm of this developmental struggle. When our ideas, feelings and acts are validated by others, we learn to inhabit the world effectively and self-esteem can be developed and sustained. As assessors we are engaged in this enquiry of the 'other' that is fundamental to our own and the candidate's identity and belonging in the world. It is the work of establishing this relationship of mutual recognition that I suggest is vital to the skills recognition experience and the efficacy of this for the candidate. Certain skills and approaches underpin this identity work and we must encourage an examination of these skills in order to fully realise the benefits of RPL.

Recent research by Smith and Clayton (2009) reiterates common themes from over a decade of VET recognition research—namely, that RPL is not well promoted; that in order to access it, learners need high levels of literacy and communication; and that evidence requirements can be overly bureaucratic and burdensome. What they found to be significant in enabling success within RPL included overt workplace support, high credibility of the assessor, and peer encouragement. Further, the relationship with a workplace mentor assisting them to navigate the process appeared 'critical' to many candidates. These notions align to Spencer's (2006) 'community development' approach to RPL and might suggest relationships not

simply characterised by the mentor showing the candidate what to do, but perhaps as relationships of mutual recognition.

In my own current doctoral research, I have been interviewing participants at key stages throughout their RPL experience. Emerging data indicate the enormous importance of the relationship with the assessor in the candidate's perceptions of success. 'Success' for these participants has meant achieving a qualification or partial credit, or being able to examine skills and plan a learning program and career goals without necessarily achieving competencies. This suggests that, at the heart of each person's evaluation of their RPL experience, is the way in which they were treated and supported by the assessor. Factors affecting this included their trust in the assessor's interpretation of their skills into the qualification framework, their sense of being understood and valued, and their perception of having influence upon the assessor. It was important for them to feel they had shared their practice wisdom rather than simply been measured by an expert against a standard. RPL candidates thus need to be 'seen' and valued for their uniqueness through specific assessor practices applied within the assessment interview, which for many may then enable them to engage more fully in the assessment process.

Assessor skills

In the light of the above theories, others' research findings and my own emerging data (to be more fully reported in a later paper), the assessor's skills and particular disposition become a major factor for further consideration. This takes us beyond simply improving the process or promotion of recognition in order to increase access by marginalised groups. If we view the purpose of recognition in a more philosophical light and understand that we are in a mutual engagement of identity construction, we can, I believe, apply it more successfully to marginalised groups and engage them in a meaningful process. In this manner, assessment requires the application of a highly complex and sophisticated skill set, balancing assessment

rigour with effective personal engagement and support. The assessor-candidate relationship is the site of negotiated meaning and a location where possibilities and promise are played out. In addition to understanding the job role and the formal competencies in question, assessors may need a perspective of 'appreciative enquiry' (as called for by Mitchell & McKenna 2006) in order to investigate positively the practices, knowledges and beliefs of the candidate, to invite reflection and inspire confidence. To do this they need engagement skills and a willingness to be taught new interpretations of experience, so that their own understandings are influenced by the interaction. The interaction then becomes a mutual engagement, rather than the application of judgement that masquerades as an objective process.

With this in mind, at the Australian Institute of Social Relations we position the skills recognition process as a co-research project in the creation of knowledge. In common with other RTOs, we strive to avoid characterising the assessment task as a checklist of criteria to be met, but rather a vital enquiry into the individual practices and underpinning knowledge and beliefs that shape the candidate's work. In much of the RPL conducted at AISR, the assessor is mentor and guide throughout the process, so they engage in a relationship of support and advice that is integral to assessment. We have discovered that the skills our educators are coincidentally trained in for their community development and community support work are significant in implementing good recognition assessment. Thus, narrative therapy and cross-cultural communication techniques have become core skill sets. These approaches require the suspension of expert knowledge, openness to difference, critical and appreciative enquiry, and genuine curiosity about alternative practices. Part of the essential toolkit for advanced assessors includes circular questions, outsider witness, unpacking meanings, 'storying' experience, questions about the learner's landscape of meaning, action and identity, culture-centred skills and similar approaches (White 2007, Morgan 2000,

Pedersen 1997). These techniques are to be found in counselling and therapy texts and generally not in the adult education literature.

Conclusion

This paper contends that in order to generate increased access to the positive benefits of RPL, critical underpinning issues related to the candidate/assessor relationship require attention. Widely promoting RPL and making it easy for the candidate to provide evidence and navigate the process are important aims. Coupled with more incentives for RTOs through re-structured funding systems, these strategies could significantly impact RPL uptake, but not necessarily address RPL's emancipatory goals by reaching disenfranchised groups. Simplifying RPL processes should not mean simplistic assessment or the reliance on process without engagement. Skills recognition requires sophisticated and complex assessment practices based on a philosophy of recognition that acknowledges the operations of power and the discursive production of identity. As frequently cited in documents outlining good assessment practice, assessors need to know the job role and have experience of the field in which they are assessing. They also need to be very familiar with the competencies to the point they can put aside the performance criteria and make professional judgments based on a holistic view of a candidate's abilities. In addition, it is critical they attend to the relationship between themselves and the candidate, the operations of power moving within that relationship and the practices and identities that are discursively produced through the engagement. If we are able to understand RPL in this context, we will practise it with caution and focus more on the relational aspects of the work, providing assessors with narrative and appreciative enquiry skills and the ability to understand cross-cultural perspectives. This approach has the capacity to transform RPL from an under-utilised social resource, to an even more highly effective element of the overall National VET Strategy.

Endnote

1   AISR is the training and education division of Relationships Australia (SA). As an RTO since 1999, the organisation delivers VET qualifications to professional groups and community participants, within a philosophy and practical framework of community development, frequently integrating RPL into broader community work projects.

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